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This winter, after stiff opposition from the Pentagon and the White House, the EPA asked the National Academies of Science to review its draft report on how much perchlorate should be deemed dangerous to public health. The delay likely will add at least a year to the EPA's long process for setting a drinking-water standard.

Mr. Woodley said that in the meantime, any Pentagon testing guidelines would reflect "a great deal of deference" to scientific uncertainties about perchlorate's health effects. "Testing is something we should do, and probably will do eventually, but it's a question of priorities," he said, while acknowledging that "every military base has, at one time or another, had munitions that included a perchlorate component."

The aborted testing proposal has caused confusion at some bases. At Mare Island Naval Shipyard near San Francisco, Navy cleanup coordinator Jerry Dunaway announced the guidelines at a recent community meeting and agreed for the first time to a longstanding EPA request to test the base perchlorate. Later, he found out the draft guidelines were moot and rescinded his announcement.

"It's troublesome to have directives around that create an incomplete characterization of a site," said Emily Roth, EPA's project manager for Mare Island. "We'll never sign off on this site without perchlorate sampling."

The draft guidelines from Mr. Woodley's office were issued at a time when some senators concerned about the perchlorate issue, including California Democrat Barbara Boxer, were holding up his nomination to the new post of assistant secretary of the Army in charge of the Army Corps of Engineers' civil works. The Senate has yet to act on his nomination.

"Our policy is under constant review," Mr. Woodley said. "This was a draft for the purpose of attracting views."#

GROUNDWATER PROTECTION

Snapshot perchlorate ag study

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By Jonathan Jeisel, staff writer

SAN MARTIN - Bob Cerruti is doing his own experiment with perchlorate and vegetables.

The well that supplies the water to Cerruti's residence of 16 years on San Martin's Moreno Court has tested positive for perchlorate, the chemical that has spread from a former Morgan Hill flare factory into South County's groundwater

table.

And with questions swirling around the safety of fruits and vegetables grown with water tainted with the chemical, Cerruti is making use of the water by turning his backyard garden into an impromptu science lab. He has planted two special groups of tomato plants, watering one "control" group with bottled water and another with well water that's presumably laced with the rocket fuel ingredient.

Cerruti is not alone in his curiosity. With the season fast approaching - if not already here - for local summer produce to hit the stands in South County, some residents are still pushing for information about whether the chemical has entered the area's fruits and vegetables.

"We are very, very, very interested in getting something going as soon as possible," said Sylvia Hamilton, president of the San Martin Neighborhood Alliance and chair of a community advisory committee on perchlorate.

At the committee's most recent meeting, Hamilton asked county officials whether "snapshot" studies of local agricultural products would be valuable, both in producing more specific local information and in ratcheting up the pressure on higher government to act more quickly on the issue. She also wondered whether the county's Farm Bureau plans any testing.

Although some state and federal agencies are planning or conducting perchlorate ag studies, there are currently no federal health standards for food, let alone drinking water. The state has set an advisory drinking water level of 4 parts per billion.

"Would a snapshot study help encourage others to do proper (food) studies?" Hamilton asked.

The nonprofit Environmental Working Group recently conducted such a study when it tested lettuce samples pulled off supermarket shelves, she said. Perchlorate was detected in four of the 22 samples, which likely came from areas in Southern California and Arizona irrigated with perchlorate-tainted Colorado River water.

County Agricultural Commissioner Greg Van Wassenhove said he believes federal agencies such as the federal Food and Drug Administration and Department of Agriculture are ultimately responsible for a comprehensive evaluation of perchlorate and produce - and noted they are lagging.

"What's been done about it is less than I think is acceptable, and we continue to press on them," he told the committee.

Van Wassenhove said he is pressuring higher government to assemble a "comprehensive, global" approach to the issue that features testing of several perchlorate-affected areas and a risk assessment that would give meaning to raw data by considering factors such as dietary intake.

However, he agreed that some sort of data collection needs to begin soon, and said he is still working to identify independent laboratories where residents can get produce tested on their own if they wish. Securing reliable testing methods is a long process because there are few standardized or validated methodologies, he said.

Representatives with Morgan Hill's Sequoia Analytical Laboratories announced they can test for perchlorate in lettuce, corn, cantaloupe and honeydew melon at 50 ppb or above. Rates are \$300 per sample for one sample per homeowner, although volume discounts may be available.

Cerruti wondered whether the county would help homeowners pay for independent tests.

That's not likely in light of the county's budget deficit, Van Wassenhove said. And in an interview, he also doubted governments would fund a study without a risk assessment. He believes there will be such an effort undertaken by the federal government within a year's time.

Jenny Mitdgaard Derry, executive director of the Farm Bureau, said the organization is discussing the testing issue and trying to make it easier for individual farmers to pursue testing.

There aren't many labs with established methodologies for testing food, and there are lots of questions about the validity of results, she said. The bureau plans to set up a meeting with Sequoia Labs to discuss such issues.

Even if tests results come out positive, it's still hard to know what that means without health standards, she said.

"The farmers do want to know if there's perchlorate in their crops," Derry said. "The Catch-22 is if you know there's an amount (of perchlorate in a product), but there are no health standards, you don't know what that means. And if you mistakenly think you're harming someone, you could lose your entire business.

"It's a pretty tough situation."#